CONFRONTATION WITH THE ACCUSED AND HER ACCUSERS:
THE SCANDAL OF GRACE
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Psalm 130
2 Corinthians 5:16–21
John 8:1–12

"Let anyone among you who is without sin
be the first to throw a stone at her."
John 8:7 (NRSV)

You, you give!
You have given light and life to the world;
You have given your only Son;
You have given yourself to us;
You have given and forgiven,
and you remember our sin no more.
And we, in response, are takers:
we take eagerly what you give us;
we take from our neighbors at hand…from
unseen neighbors greedily…from weak neighbors…
we take all we can lay our hands on.
Our taking does not match your giving.
In this Lenten season revise our taking,
that it may be grateful and disciplined,
even as you give in ways generous and
overwhelming.

Walter Brueggemann

Garry Wills, distinguished Northwestern University professor and popular author, was speaking at the annual Christian Century banquet a few years ago. His topic was American culture and politics from a Christian perspective. The death penalty was in the news at the time. In the question-and-answer session afterward, someone asked about capital punishment. Wills thought for a moment and said, "All we know about Jesus and the subject of execution is that he stopped one."

It is one of the most dramatic stories in the Bible. The scene itself is ghastly. Jesus is teaching in the Jerusalem temple, sitting, as rabbis do when they

teach; people are standing around in a circle, listening. His friends and disciples are surely there as well. Suddenly there is an interruption. I imagine a group of men, Scribes, Pharisees—religious leaders and officials—literally dragging a woman along; their faces are red with anger and self-righteousness. The woman has violated the religious law, the holiness code in the Book of Leviticus, which lists adultery, along with a lot of other offenses—talking back to your parents, for instance—as a capital crime. The punishment is death by stoning, a particularly brutal and horrible form of execution, still practiced in some parts of the world. She's been caught in the act. There is no denying her guilt. So why didn't they stone her? Why did they bring her to Jesus? John says it is all about trying to put him in an untenable position, "between a rock and a hard place," Frances Taylor Gench puts it in her book *Encounters with Jesus,* which has been leading us through this series of sermons. They know he's not going to approve; they want him to say something so flagrantly contradictory to the law of Moses that they can bring charges against him. There is only one answer here: death by stoning.

Imagine the woman. Imagine her walking in dignified silence in the midst of an angry mob of men who are shouting insults at her, maybe even spitting on her. Or perhaps she's struggling, being dragged, pleading for mercy, wailing, stunned by what is happening, perhaps only moments before having been in the arms of her lover, who is conspicuously and curiously absent. I see her lying in the dirt, terrified. I see them with stones in their hands, ready to begin, to do what they intended to do.

"What do you say about this, Jesus? You know the law." Instead of answering, he bends over, writes something in the dirt. He interrupts the momentum physically. Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams was in Manhattan on September 11, 2001. He wrote a reflection entitled "Writing in the Dust," remembering Jesus at this moment.

Williams wrote, "What on earth is he doing? There is only one meaning that seems to me obvious in light of what we learned that morning. He hesitates. He does not draw a line, fix an interpretation. . . . He allows a moment, a longish moment in which people are given an opportunity to see themselves differently" (Gench, p. 54).

Jesus stops the momentum. He writes in the dust. After a time, he straightens up, looks at them. They've been slowed down and quieted by his peculiar behavior. Looking slowly at all of them, each face, he says, "Let anyone who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." No one moved. No one says a word. There is a silence, a stillness tense and heavy. The woman, lying in the dirt, holds her breath. It is the oldest man in the crowd, one of the elders, who slowly looks at the stone in his hand and drops it and turns and walks away. Then another, a Pharisee, does the

same, then another and another until they are all gone. The woman still lying in the dirt, moments from an excruciating death, still alive, is hardly able to breathe.

He bends down again, writes in the dust again, slowly straightens up. Now it's just the two of them.

"Where are they? Has no one condemned you?"

"No, sir."

"Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."

Questions remain. Where was the man? Why wasn't he brought to Jesus as well? The law doesn't discriminate. Was it simply a matter of gender inequality and the oppression of women, as some have suggested, or is it because the man was a Roman soldier and thus not subject to Jewish law?

And how exactly do you catch someone in the very act, as the accusers charge? By stalking, snooping, or by entrapment, as some suggest, thereby exonerating the man.

There is a consistent and shameful tendency in our religion to pay more attention to sex and sexual behavior than any other behavior. Perhaps we merely reflect our culture, which uses sex to sell everything from automobiles to soap powder and saturates the media so that our children's sex education doesn't come from parents or schools or church so much as television sitcoms and soap operas.

Our own Presbyterian church decided fourteen years ago that church leaders ought not to commit any act our Book of Confessions calls sin, a long and interesting list that includes greed, gossip, charging interest, and owning pictures of Jesus. But what we really intended was to punish, pretty much alone, one category of people: gay and lesbian Presbyterians. I have yet to hear of anyone being denied ordination for gossiping.

In a fine editorial in the *New York Times* this morning, Nicholas Kristof writes about the welcome transition in American Evangelical Christianity from an obsession with sexual behavior, mostly homosexuality and abortion, to the topic the Bible really cares about, namely poverty.

In the popular mind, Christianity is still characterized as anti-homosexual and too judgmental, but that's changing, thanks be to God.

The largest relief agency in the word is now World Vision, a huge organization with Evangelical Christian roots, and in Haiti, more than half the food aid is coming from religious groups and churches, Kristof points out.

What do you suppose Jesus was writing when he literally stopped the momentum rushing toward stoning the woman accused of adultery and leaned down and wrote in the dust? Was he merely doodling, making time to think and compose his response? Gench says she was leading a women's Bible study on this passage one time when a woman volunteered that she knew exactly what Jesus wrote in the dirt. He wrote, "It takes two."

By his behavior and words, Jesus essentially disarms a lynch mob and prevents a public execution, redirects the attention of the men with stones in their hands back onto themselves, and finally—and not the least—saves a human life, gives a life, a future, back to a woman about to die, frees her from her guilt and sends her on her way.

Forgiveness is a big and difficult issue. Forgiveness is complicated and fascinating. The media focuses intense attention on celebrity apologies: Mr. Toyota; General Stanley McChrystal for a strike that killed twenty-one Afghan civilians; Tiger Woods; Mark Sanford; Eliot Spitzer; and Pete Rose, a professional baseball player who was caught betting on games in which he played and who somehow managed to apologize without really apologizing.

A modern classic on the complexity and difficulty we have with forgiveness is the book *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities* and *Limits of Forgiveness.* The author, Simon Wiesenthal, was a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp where Jews were being put to death. One day, camp authorities took him to the bedside of a dying S.S. guard. The man was a lapsed Catholic, and as he lay dying, he was haunted by the terrible things he had done, the appalling evil in which he had been an enthusiastic participant. Now, near death, he wanted to confess his crimes, and he wanted to confess to a Jew, who, he reasoned, was the only one who could offer forgiveness.

The two men talked for several hours. The German soldier told Wiesenthal his life story, and at the end, he asked for forgiveness. Wiesenthal thought quietly for a long time. He writes, "At last I made up my mind and without a word I left the room" (p. 55).

But it didn't end there. Wiesenthal survived, but he couldn't stop thinking about his decision. So he wrote an essay and told the story and invited fifty-three distinguished men and women (academics, politicians, religious leaders) to comment and to tell what they would have done.

The responses vary, of course. Presbyterian theologian Robert MacAfee Brown, a WWII Navy chaplain, sympathized with Wiesenthal's dilemma and said essentially that he couldn't forgive either: it was too much to ask of any human being. Brown said he would have told the man to take it all to God.

Father Theodore Hesburgh, President of Notre Dame, wrote the shortest response in the book:

"My whole instinct," Father Hesburgh wrote, "is to forgive. I am in the forgiving business. . . . I think of God as the great forgiver. . . . Of course the sin here is monumental—God's mercy is infinite. . . . I would forgive because God would forgive."

The Bible has a lot to say about forgiveness. The lovely 130th Psalm:

> Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. . . .
> If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities,
> Lord, who could stand?
> But there is forgiveness with you.

Jesus talked a lot about forgiveness. "Forgive us our sins, as you forgive the sins of others," he taught his disciples to pray and we pray every Sunday, affirming that being forgiven and forgiving are related.

The late Henri Nouwen, Dutch priest and author wrote, "To forgive another person from the heart is an act of liberation. . . . We set that person free. . . . But there is more. We also free ourselves from the burden of being the offended one. . . . As long as we do not forgive those who have wounded us, we pull them along with us as a heavy load. Forgiveness liberates not only the other but also ourselves."

Jesus told stories about forgiveness. Jesus told a harsh story about a servant who was forgiven his debt by his master and turned around and refused to forgive his debtor and who ended up being punished severely for not forgiving. He told an unforgettable story about an ungrateful son who took his share of his father's money left home, spent it all, ended up living with pigs, and came home to apologize, and before the son could get the words out, his father was running down the road, opening his arms and embracing him. It's an amazing idea about a God who extends forgiveness even before people get around to asking or confessing; an amazing idea that we are forgiven not by working off our guilt, not by being shamed, shunned, punished publicly, but by opening our hearts to the gift of God: forgiveness. Someone called it, memorably, amazing grace.

It is so radical that St. Paul called it a whole brand-new reality: “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation, everything old has passed away: see everything has become new.”

I love those words when they are said in worship after we have confessed our sin together. Sin is the great equalizer. We are all in it together, and for hearts that are honest and open there is a new creation: the old is gone; everything is new and fresh and possible.

I have never forgotten my first experience of grace. As offenses go it was pretty small potatoes. I’ve done far worse, but at the time it seemed pretty awful. The people across the street from where we lived put in a new sidewalk. I watched every day as the old concrete was broken and dug out, new forms built, cement mixed in a wheelbarrow, poured into the forms, smoothed and edged expertly. It was a thing of beauty, that new sidewalk was. And it occurred to me that it might be a good idea to put my initials in that fresh cement, so after dark, that is what I did, small letters, not too conspicuous, JB, in a corner in the drying cement.

Mr. Steele was not amused. It didn’t take him long to conclude who JB was, so he confronted my father angrily. My father assured him that I was not the culprit, that I would not do such a thing, but that he would talk to me and report back to Mr. Steele. I remember the day of that conversation as if it were yesterday. “Did you do it?” he asked. “Put your initials in Mr. Steele’s sidewalk?” (A mitigating factor was that he had allowed me and my little brother to put our initials in our new sidewalk earlier, so I knew how to do it and how cool it was.) Well, I was terrified. I was caught in an irrevocable crime, and I didn’t know what would happen. So I lied. I told him I didn’t do it. It must have been someone else—maybe my cousin Jim Buchanan, maybe someone who wanted to get me in trouble. He did the most amazing thing. He believed me. He trusted me. The conversation ended. He went to Mr. Steele and said I didn’t do it. I had told him I didn’t do it, so I didn’t do it.

Why he did that I’ll never know. He surely knew I was guilty—twice: I did it and I lied to him about it. Why he didn’t punish me I’ll never know. Had he punished me I would have forgotten the whole episode, I am sure. But the fact that he trusted me, forgave me, in some way shouldered my guilt himself, took it upon himself, I’m still thinking about sixty years later.

Forgiveness is stunning when it happens. Grace, which is another word for it, is amazing always, and powerful and transformative.

My own conclusion about the question of what Jesus wrote in the dust when the angry mob, with stones in their hands, asked him about the guilty

woman, are words he knew and they knew by heart and we sang this morning. I think he wrote,

> If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities,
> Lord, who could stand?
> But there is forgiveness with you.

And after they walked away, one by one, and left him and the woman could breathe finally and he bent down and wrote again in the dust, I think he wrote more from that beautiful psalm, for her this time:

> With the Lord there is steadfast love, . . .
> and great power to redeem.

The story ends there. “Go,” he said, “and sin no more.” Go back to your husband and your family. Make amends. Ask for forgiveness. Rebuild. Start all over again. It’s possible. Everything is new and fresh and possible. Go”

And those angry men: did his grace get to them, too? It must have, must have caused them to think differently and act differently to release their grip on the stones in their hands and the righteous judgmentalism in their hearts and to allow love and forgiveness and grace into their religion and their lives and their hearts.

A captain of an eighteenth-century British slave ship, with no particular interest in religion, caught in a storm one night, fearing for his life, suddenly saw, as if in a new light, what he was doing: transporting human beings who had been captured like animals and would be sold as slaves for enormous profit, which he would share. Saw it finally, clearly. He had been blind. But now, that night, he could see.

He made it through the storm, came home, and began to think about the enormity of the evil in which he was involved, began to experience the heavy guilt, to feel the crushing weight of his monstrous sin. He started to go to church for the first time in his life. He heard a new idea: that there is a God who forgives and lifts the burden of guilt and gives new life. John Newton, slave-ship captain, became a Christian and a minister in the Church of England and somewhere around 1770 wrote a little poem:

> Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,
> that saved a wretch like me!
> I once was lost, but now am found,
> was blind, but now I see.
>
> Through many dangers, toils, and snares,
> I have already come;

’Tis grace has brought me safe thus far
and grace will lead me home.

It’s for you and me, for the woman about to be stoned, for the slave trader. It’s for all of us—amazing grace.

Amen.